MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Captain Robert “Bob” Webbon

Date: August 6, 2006

Place: Houston, Texas

Interviewer: Jason Theriot

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with Captain Robert Webbon, W-e-b-b-o-n, on August 6th, 2006, by Jason Theriot. Captain Bob Webbon is a pilot on the Houston Ship Channel, and this is his oral history interview, Port of Houston history, tape one.

RW: My name is Bob Webbon, and I grew up in Bridge City, Texas. My dad was a chief engineer, marine engineer with Gulf Oil. He sailed with Gulf Oil for about, oh, thirty-something years off and on. He grew up in the Bronx, had always been associated with the sea and shipyards, and on tugboats. He was a hoss piper [phonetic]. He never went to any of the academies, so he worked his way up, and when he retired from Gulf Oil he was a senior marine engineer with Gulf Oil.

[Side conversation, not transcribed.]

So I had been exposed to the marine industry since I was a kid, and over in Port Arthur area when I was growing up, everybody knew somebody whose dad was in the Merchant Marine. It wasn't like today, where nobody knows what the Merchant Marine is, nobody knows what it means to go to sea, and it's just kind of an alien thing now. People have no idea what goes on in the marine industry.

But back then it was cool, you know. I felt privileged to be part of a marine household, though it was very hard. He would leave for three months at a time, and then he'd be home for a month and a half, and then leave for three months. It was very hard on my mom. It's a tough life. But it gave us, you know, the well being to have a nice place.

I grew up on the water, in boats and in the bayous over there, running around on bayous since I was a kid in little boats and what have you, so always have been on the water. But my mom was adamant that I wouldn't go into marine industry, and so Dad, he wasn't going to rock the boat, so he said, "Yeah, yeah. You're going to go to college. You're going to make something out of yourself. You're not going to go to sea."

So, you know, I never really bucked the system too hard, and I wasn't too dumb. Said, "Well, I should do what they say," and I went off to school. I went to a couple of different schools and I ended up graduating from University of Houston.

And while I was going to school my dad made one big mistake, though, and that was he said, "Hey, but while you're going to school I'm going to get you a job," and naturally that was on a ship. And I had a ball. I just never had more fun working than I did when I was on a ship. I worked construction jobs and you know, all kinds of different things, as you're growing up, going to school, you

know, being a waiter and just trying to make some extra cash while I was in school, but I always had the most fun going to sea.

And once I graduated I went to work right over here in La Port [phonetic] for a Norwegian company called Frank Moan [phonetic], and Frank Moan is the owner of that company and started that company, built fish pumps in Norway. He became very successful with these pumps, and somewhere in there he decided to try and build a pump for the petrochemical industry.

He started working on it, he perfected it, and because of Frank Moan's developments in being able to pump petrochemicals and really high-grade chemicals very efficiently and very safely, his company just exploded. He's a multi-millionaire in Norway now, and the partnering of that technology with a couple of other shipping companies, like Stolt-Nelson [phonetic] and Oddfield [phonetic] made those companies.

So by using the technologies of Frank Moan's pumping systems, and the expertise in the marine industry of Stolt-Nelson and Oddfield, they developed this ability to transport petrochemicals just incredibly efficiently. So it was a great time for me to work over there.

Though I did not graduate with my first degree with a marine background, I had a marine background. I knew what was going on. I was hired in as purchasing, and

they started to realize that I could really be of assistance. They had to train me, but I could add credibility and assistance to them, and also had local contacts to help them kind of get into the area.

They did two large contracts for U.S.-flag projects. They had to build a manufacturing facility here to provide the products, which were subsidized, so they had to have U.S.-made products on the ships. So they just brought the whole factory over. So it was really a good experience for me. I didn't really realize it at the time, and a friend here that I sailed with got me the job. So I really enjoyed that, because it was once again working with ships and back in the marine industry.

But after a while I realized that I really had a lot more fun going to sea than pushing a desk. My dad had retired, but in his retirement had gone back to work for Sabine Towing, and I got to shooting the bull with him one day, and he goes, "Man, you know what the third mates are making?" And I just could have punched him. [laughs]

So anyway, I decided to go back to school. I just looked at a piece of graph paper, said, well, if I go back and work my way up to third mate, versus going to school and just getting my license, what's it going to take? And I basically sacrificed everything to go back to school. But I went in, I had a good job, I had a nice sailboat, a nice car, and everything was going good, but I just wasn't happy.

By the time I got out of A&M I had to sell the car that I'd bought from my dad for nine hundred bucks back to him so I could get nine hundred bucks. [laughs] I had nothing except debt.

JT: Did you have a family at the time?

RW: No. I was single at the time, but within the month I married my wife, and we're still married today; bought a truck and got debt, and got a job with Zapata Offshore. So that was an interesting month. It was a time where there wasn't much hiring in the maritime industry. There weren't many third-mate jobs out there.

And I forget the name of the rig that had capsized off of Newfoundland, I believe it was. They discovered in the investigation of that disaster that the ballast controllers, who were in charge of the stability of those floating rigs, had no training in naval architecture, in stability, and, you know, it was unfair to them, and it was a gross oversight by the oil industry to have the very complex puzzle of stability on these floating rigs, and not have professionals in charge of maintaining the stability.

Thus opened up a large opportunity for a lot of new third mates coming out of the academies, to work in the offshore industry. I had not been trained as far as the

equipment or the oil industry was concerned, but I had had the background by growing up in Texas, and we did projects at Framo [phonetic], with Frank Moan, for oil platforms and what have you.

So it wasn't completely alien to me, and certainly the stability puzzle, I mean that's what I was trained to do. So it was a unique mix—I'm sure it probably still is out there—of maritime expertise and oil-exploration expertise on those floating rigs. But I was one of the first ones hired based on that new emphasis, and I worked with Zapata for about six months or what have you, eight months, something like that.

I was able to finally get in and get an interview with Exxon shipping company, and was subsequently hired by Exxon shipping company as a third mate, and I spent the next, oh, about twelve years with Exxon, and it was a great experience. I mean, Exxon is a demanding company, you know. They expected a lot out of their people. We had typically good equipment, good people to work with. They didn't really skimp on our operations and things like that.

We basically did things the right way, and that kind of set the standard in me of what I expect when I go on ships and I see different operations going on on ships, was my experiences with Exxon. They were good, they were good. They taught me, they trained me. They spent a lot of money on my training and, you know, had enjoyed it, but it's a tough life. You're gone half the time. My wife used to

always kid me that, "We haven't been married for six years. We've only been married for three years," because I'm only around half the time. [laughs] So even though we didn't have kids it was still tough, you know, not only being away from my wife, but the rest of my family. It was hard.

I really didn't see myself doing anything different than working either on the ships or in the oil industry, through shoreside support for the ships, until I got on one ship out in San Francisco Bay. That ship was the *Exxon Galveston*, and it was a small lightering ship in San Francisco Bay.

What we did was the large VLCCs would come down from Valdez, they'd come into San Francisco Bay, and they were too heavy to get to any of the docks. They were too deep. So we would lighter the cargo off and take it up to all the different refineries, Chevron, Shell, Exxon, different facilities, and we'd just go round and round and round till that VLCC was light enough in draft that she could make it up to the dock with the remaining cargo onboard.

Well, the unique thing was that we never took a pilot. We did all the ship handling ourselves. Typically the third mates did all the transits; the third and second mates did all the transits, and the chief mates got to do a lot of dockings, because both of the masters were very proficient at piloting. They were very proficient at docking and undocking, mooring the ships, and going alongside the

Vs while they were at anchor there in the bay, so they were very comfortable allowing all the mates the opportunity to learn.

Through those experiences I realized, man, I really enjoy this. This is—I'd never done anything while I was in my career that I really enjoyed that much. You know, it went back to all my small-boat endeavors, because I grew up, like I say, in small boats, and then got into sailing, and had actually moved to this area to join another good friend in an Olympic campaign, and so had done a lot of very competitive sailing, and a lot of boating and what have you, and I found that ship handling was just an extension of that.

So from that point I decided I'd really like to be a pilot. And living here in the Clear Lake area, I actually had run into several pilots that I would see on different ships when I'd come into Baytown. They were always very positive and very encouraging when I was on the ships, and this was before I was on the *Galveston*, that I should put in an application with the Houston Pilots. But after my experiences on the Galveston I really, in my mind, said, "Yeah, that's what I want to do."

So I spent the next five years, you know, applying, getting to know the pilots in Houston Pilots, and it's just like any other thing, joining a law firm or a group of doctors and what have you. It's a business partnership, and they want to know you. They want to get to know you. They want to know your background, and

not just so much from all the FBI checks and things that they do through the application process. They really want to get to know you before you're asked to join the association.

And nine years ago I was finally asked to join the bar, and man, it's just been great. It's the best thing I could ever hope for, yes.

JT: So tell me about that first voyage when you were in college. You mentioned that your dad got you a job and you went out to sea for the first time, because it seems that something happened to you, possibly, on that trip, that you realized—

RW: Well, I think if most any eighteen-year-old boy had the opportunity to go on a ship and go from Los Angeles to Portland, Oregon, to Seattle, Washington, and you know, it was a total adventure to me, get paid to do it, see new cities, go into towns, go into the clubs, meet different types of gals and different types of guys doing different things.

You know, I'd never been snow skiing before, you know, except when I was a kid up in New Mexico, but I had an opportunity to go on my own; went down to South America and through the Panama Canal with a bunch of men who enjoyed their work, who had known my dad and were curious to see how I would be on the ships, and I think they got a kick of me really having a great time, but working very hard.

You know, I always wanted to work overtime and always wanted to make some extra money. I didn't really feel like it was worth my while to sit in a rack and read a book, so they really appreciated that, so they treated me very well. And it was, like I said, a great adventure, and I think if any young high school kid had an opportunity to do that, it would scar them for life. [laughs]

JT: Did your father bring most of his work home?

RW: My dad was an engineer, and he never stopped being an engineer, you know. Everything he did around the house was from an engineering standpoint. I mean he was a wood butcher, but let's put it this way, very few things were nailed, most everything was bolted, you know. That's just the way he thought. He was a great guy.

I remember before one Christmas we started getting these boxes. He was on the ship and he kept shipping these boxes home, and my mom would take them and she would hide them. She would stick them back in the closet and I'd go back there and look and like, what is this, you know. And these boxes kept coming in. And he was going to be off for Christmas that year, which was a big deal. I mean, that's a big deal for your dad to come from sea and be off for Christmas.

He came in and all these—and then when he came in he had boxes. I just couldn't figure out what it was, and when I got up Christmas morning there was this hand-built go cart that he had built on the ship. It had rack-and-pinion steering. It had disc brakes. It was over the top. It was really a cool piece of engineering. I still have a red wagon that he built on the ship, that he hammered and riveted out of a piece of steel, hand riveted it, and the thing still does not leak. It's fifty years old. You can still leave it out in the yard and it will not leak.

So, yes, he always brought it home with him, you know. He never quit being an engineer.

JT: Did he ever tell you stories?

RW: Oh god, yes.

JT: Do you remember maybe one or two in particular about being on the sea, something outrageous maybe?

RW: Oh, you know, it was very different back then. When you think about going to sea, it was going to sea back then. I mean, they had thirty-five, yes, they probably had at least thirty-five guys on a small tanker, whereas today they'll try and do it with half that. And they would do it with half that if the federal rules on their CLIs would let them do that.

But back then they had a steward, a cook, a second cook, an officer's mess, a crew's mess man, they had a B.R., so you know, they had five or six people just in the steward's department. And back then as an officer you had a man that came in every morning, changed all your linens, made your beds. You went to a meal. There was a mess man there to take your order, bring you your food, and you were treated very much as an officer, because it was hard work, still is hard work.

And the oil companies really, they had a different outlook about how things should be done. In the engine room, in the engineering department, once you got to be chief engineer like my dad, the first engineer was on the same level as the chief mate, and the first engineer asked the chief mate would just feel like, hey, the engine room is my domain. I'm in charge, you know. All the particular work is supervised by the first assistant engineer, and then the chief engineer is over the first assistant, and it's his responsibility to make sure everything goes okay.

So my dad would tell me that, you know, back then when he was chief engineer the first wouldn't even let him go in the engine room. The first would just get very upset if the chief engineer came down, except before lunch to pick up the daily log book, and you know, there were some chiefs that would even wear white gloves into the engine room, and there'd better not be any dirt on the handrails. And it was spotless.

It was that sense of doing the professional job back then, that really focused on making sure that everything was working properly, anything that was being worked on was being worked on effectively, and they had plenty of people to do it right.

Sometimes my dad said, you know, once he became chief engineers, sometimes the hardest part of the day was finding something to read, because the first assistants really took it upon themselves to take responsibility of the day-to-day operation of the engine room, as did the chief mates.

You know, a captain was not allowed on deck during cargo operations. That was the domain of the chief mate, and he didn't want to see any captain coming down on deck, getting in the middle of his business. That was his responsibility and it showed his competency that he could do it properly, do it effectively without any problems, and then the paperwork would just be turned over to the captain. So yes, he would tell me about that, and I always thought that was pretty interesting, that there was this level of authority that was expected.

JT: Did he travel during any wartime?

RW: Yes. He volunteered for the U.S. Navy during World War II. When he was a kid up in the Bronx they were out playing a game in the East River, and what they

would do is they would get up on the bank and they'd get a big rock, and they'd hold this rock and then jump into the water and see who could go to the bottom of the East River. You had to scoop up a handful of mud and then come back up to the surface with your hand full of mud.

So he was doing that one day and he blew his eardrum out, and so ever since he was a kid he's only had one ear, and the navy wouldn't take him with just one ear. But at that time he was already a chief engineer, a very respected engineer, and what the navy did do is they said, "We want you to be in charge of our quality control of all of the Gulf Coast shipyards building U.S. naval vessels."

He would tell me that they would put him in a limo with a motorcade and send him to New Orleans to look at a new weapon or a new vessel, or a new something. Or if they had a problem they would send him somewhere else, just going from shipyard to shipyard, and he mostly worked at Livingston Shipyard in Orange, which they built a lot of frigates.

He actually worked on, he told me—and I had read about the Hedgehog missile system—he was one of the first engineers working on that particular program. So yes, he was very involved in the war effort from a shore-based-support standpoint, but he wanted to go to sea. He really wanted to serve on a tanker. So he did that, and I really have no idea—I don't think he was involved in Korea or Vietnam.

But during Desert Storm when they were activating a lot of the Ready Reserve fleet over in Beaumont, you know, they have all these ships laid up for sealift capability during a war effort such as Desert Storm, and then what we're going through right now in Iraq. There's a lot of reserve tonnage that has been activated.

Well, a lot of that tonnage before Desert Storm had never come out and been brought out of mothballs and up to snuff, and one of the companies over in Port Arthur, they hired my dad, who was in his eighties at that point, and said, "We want to hire you to come over and help us with bringing these ships out of mothballs."

And oh, man, he was ecstatic, you know. By that time he had since retired from civilian, but he was just ecstatic, because a lot of that tonnage were steamships. There are not a whole lot of guys around who still understand steamships. The first day he showed up over there, he went down, he's got his coveralls on, you know, he's looking for the tools. He shows up and they have a generator pulled apart, and he's over saying, "Well, you know, let's do this and do that."

And the owner of the company was one of the Navy Reserve specialists, and another man down from Washington, they all walked over to him and they went, "Chief."

He goes, “Yeah?”

They said, “What the hell are you doing?”

And he goes, “We’re tearing this generator down. We need to get this thing—.”

They go, “We didn’t hire you for that.”

And he’s like, “Well, what did you hire me for?”

And they just went, “Come with us.” They took him back under the ventilator where they had the cool air coming down. They had a nice big chair set there for him, and a side desk, and they said, “We want you to sit here, or we want you to just walk around. You are not to pick up a tool. You are not to touch anything. You’re going to have this man with you, and you are here to make sure that this job gets done right. We didn’t hire you to come in here and fix anything. We’re depending on you to help us get this entire engine room together.”

And that hit him like a stone, because he always wanted to be in the middle, with his hands dirty. That was just the way it is. So that was an interesting tale, but he was very much involved in bringing those ships out for Desert Storm.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: Your schooling for maritime, you said you went to A&M?

RW: Yes.

JT: And that's where you got your training to become a third mate?

RW: Correct, correct. There are five state schools, Maine, Mass[achusetts], New York, California, and Texas, and then there's one federal school, King's Point. Through any one of the six, when you graduate you graduate with the sea time for a third mate's license, and a college degree, and then you're qualified to take the test to get your third mate's license from the Coast Guard, and that's pretty much the way it goes.

JT: So you had already—

RW: A degree from University of Houston, so I had all my basic coursework done. I could have done it, but the CFSs require you to be in the Corps of Cadets for three years. That's a federal requirement, so I had to be there for three years, though I could probably have done the coursework in two.

JT: And you had already had years of experience being on the sea.

RW: Correct.

JT: What was the one thing that the A&M school taught you about the business?

RW: The science of the business, you know, whether it was, like I'd said, whether it was stability, naval architecture, ship design, some of the science of ship handling, certainly the science of the business of the maritime industry, all of those things that you must have to really be a professional in the industry. You know, just because you've knocked around on ships it makes you a merchant mariner, but it doesn't make you a professional in the industry. The school gives you the basic concepts. It's just like any degree. It gives you the ability to enter a field, and then it's up to you to build on that.

JT: I'm not trying to guess your age, but let's fill in a couple of dates here so we can just do a chronology—

RW: That's easy, I can just tell you. [laughs]

JT: So let's see. The first time you got on a ship when you were in college, what year was that that you first began sailing?

RW: [19]73.

JT: Okay, and when did you graduate from A&M?

RW: [19]85.

JT: Okay. And then shortly thereafter, within a year or two you started with Exxon, is that right?

RW: Yes, within a year.

JT: Tell me about growing up in Port Arthur, in the Port Arthur area, with emphasis on the maritime industry and the petrochemical industry that was emerging around you. What was that like, growing up in that area with booming new development?

RW: You know, I had a very unique childhood in that we grew up on a bayou, right on the water, and so very few kids get to grow up the way I grew up, which was out in nature every day. Like I say, in the summertime we were always in our little boats on the bayou. My dad built my boat, you know. It's kind of like being down in Louisiana and having your dad build your first P-row [phonetic].

Well, my dad built a little pram, a little three-horsepower Johnson on it, and I don't know when I started running the thing, but I couldn't have been much older than seven or eight. So we were always out in the marshes, fishing and

waterskiing, and in the wintertime we'd be hunting, you know, duck hunting and what have you, so that was my perspective.

Then when I would see the refineries, you know, I always thought they were very, you know, I just was not impressed. I just thought they were—I didn't like that part of Port Arthur and Beaumont. To me that was the big negative, because I didn't understand what it meant to me. You know, I didn't understand that my dad's jobs depended on that Gulf refinery in Port Arthur.

But when we'd go through the refinery to go to the ship, I mean, it was carbon black. You know, you go by the cat crackers, you know, and the cokers. Of course, I had no idea what was going on at that time. My dad was very sharp. He understood the pollution problems at the refineries. He spoke of it.

The interesting thing is that when you're on a ship, and to this day a shipping company pays your transportation to meet the ship, so if the ship is coming into Houston and you live in Bangor, Maine, they'll fly you to Houston. They pay for that. So you could live anywhere in the country you want, and meet your ship, and your company was going to pay your transportation.

But when you go down to the galley every evening and you sit around that table, it's guaranteed that 80 to 90 percent of all those seamen sitting at that table live within ten to fifteen minutes of their in-laws. I mean, that's life. You can't

expect your wife to live out on a ranch in Wyoming because you want to, and you're gone more than half the time, unless she really wants to be away from her parents and all of the support system for her.

So that's why we lived there. I look back, you know. My mom's parents and all of her support system was in Port Arthur. My dad wasn't from Port Arthur, she was, and he never really—he liked living there, but he would have preferred—you know, he always wanted to move to North Carolina and live up in the mountains on a big lake. That was his deal. And like I said, he spoke of the pollutions problems back then. It was known; he knew it. He was a smart man.

So the refineries and what have you didn't make a real positive impression on me.

JT: Compare piloting a little wooden craft that your dad built for the little bayous in Port Arthur, to steering that *Galveston* tanker through San Francisco. To me, from seeing images of these lightering tankers, it's a little overwhelming to picture myself actually in control of the helm. How did you compare those two things?

RW: I read an analogy once that docking a ship is like trying to park a car on a moving sidewalk covered with ball bearings. You know, the thing about piloting is that you're always just compensating, you know, from the perfect course. You never can steer the perfect course for more than a few minutes, and then you're always

trying to get it back to that perfect positioning or that perfect approach, the perfect speed, and so piloting you're just always compensating.

And, you know, does it have anything to do with growing up on small boats? Does that make you any better or worse? I don't know. I think to me it just gave me the aptitude to enjoy ships, just to physically enjoy ships, and enjoy boats, enjoy ships, and you know, I'm not into airplanes, okay? I'm into ships and still am into small boats and what have you.

So I think it's more of a comfort, you know, and an enjoyment that you get out of it. The dynamics of piloting a ship are totally different, but it's a skill that's scientifically learned. It's like being an art minor or an art major when you go to a university. The first thing they do is make you copy the greats, and they want you to reproduce. When you write they want you to write like the best writers. And then only after you've learned those things do they say, "Okay, now go out and create." And it's the same type of trade approach.

So it's a skill that is learned, it's a skill that is scientifically described, and it's a skill that is taught with some very technical equipment these days, through simulation.

JT: Tell me about those twelve years with Exxon. What exactly did you do?

RW: I started as third mate. I worked my way up to chief mate, and I acquired my master's license. I worked on crude oil tankers. I worked on chemical tankers. I probably visited most every port in the United States, and the different trades I was involved in was basically two trades. One was the ANS trade, the Alaska North Slope crude trade, the chemical trade, and then another Exxon trade called the Hondo production out off of California. All of those trades were challenging, and to me incredibly impressive feats of the oil industry.

When I was working the North Slope, oil was coming down the Valdez, piped down and then loaded onto the Vs in Valdez, and a large amount of it was shipped all the way down to Panama, and then the ships discharged into facilities there on the Pacific Coast of Panama, went into the Trans-Panama Pipeline over to the Caribbean side, and there the small shuttle tankers were loaded in Cherokee Grande, and that oil for Exxon was then taken to Baytown, Baton Rouge, and up to Bay Way, New York.

So you had a whole fleet of shuttle tankers taking that Alaskan oil up to these Gulf Coast refineries and the Northeast refineries. So it was an incredible system for the country and for the oil industry to develop this ability to move oil from the North Slope of Alaska all the way to New York City.

Then the Hondo fields was a production facility off of Santa Barbara, and at that time Exxon negotiated with the environmentalists and the State of California the

ability to open up that field, but the oil could not be brought ashore. It had to be shipped out in shuttle tankers. So we used a system that is used a lot over in the North Sea and other places, Africa now and other places around the country where the production goes into a floating tanker that de-waters it, and then another tanker comes up bow to bow and loads the crude oil on that receiving tanker into the shuttle tanker, and then we'd bring it all the way back right here to Baytown. That was a fun trip, because we always had to go through the Panama Canal. I always enjoyed the Panama Canal. The weather was always good.

Then I also worked on the chemical tankers. At that time we had three chemical tankers when I joined Exxon. One of them was mothballed a couple of years after I rejoined, and they had two new ships that were built, the *Wilmington* and the *Charleston*, and each of those tankers were built, one for the Baytown refinery, one for the Baton Rouge refinery, and they were built to deliver lube oils, specialty chemicals from these two very large refineries up to the Northeast for distribution.

And then just as importantly, Exxon had a system where they would take mates off of the ships and bring them into the office here in Houston, or other offices around the country, and on two separate times I went into the Baytown refinery and had two different roles for Exxon shipping company, but was located in the Baytown refinery.

That's where I finally got an understanding of what goes on in refineries, and that was huge for me. I got along great with the guys there. They took me kind of under their wing, and took me through flow courses at the refinery, so, you know, they'd take me out in a refinery and show me what cat crackers were, and cokers and pipe stills. You know, they taught me how it all fits together, and how you put it in, and what you get at the end of the line, and I found it fascinating.

I often thought my first impressions growing up around Port Arthur and how negative I was about the refineries, even to the point of saying I'd never work in a refinery, to now looking forward to going to the refinery to learn more about what was going on, and really developed just a great appreciation for the engineering, the technology, that in the planning and the analytical side of it is just amazing to me still today. I'm just so impressed with the oil industry and the things they do. I mean, it's just very impressive to me.

JT: Did it change your opinion about the substance of your cargo that you were transporting?

RW: It gave me a better understanding of the value, for sure. Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Until I was exposed to what really goes on in these refineries, I really didn't—you know, I knew what the crude was used for, but I didn't understand how it was pulled apart and put back together. You know, I didn't understand what goes on in cat crackers and things like that. Of course in school I'd seen

books and things like that, but all the pieces coming together really gave me a much better appreciation for the cargos, absolutely.

JT: Tell me about the pilots of yesterday and the pilots of today, particularly in the ship channel. What are some of the stories that you've heard about the old timers, and how that industry has changed?

RW: Our industry has changed radically. Piloting used to be a real seat-of-your-pants type of deal, you know. Well, I mean, it goes way back, but I'm not going to get back into the history of piloting, but I'm just going to talk about piloting on this channel. This channel is very unique. This port is very unique. It's probably one of the most unique ports on the planet, and the history of this port is one of the most unique stories on the planet, of a seaport.

The techniques for running this channel were designed right here. The old timers are the ones that came up with the ability to run ships through a narrow channel where there wasn't even room for two ships to pass in a narrow channel. They developed techniques that we still use today, and are still recognized worldwide, and it's even been recognized in a court of law, this is the way you meet ships in a narrow channel, as developed on the Houston ship channel.

And really, what has moved us into a whole new era is, you know, liability. Before, if you had a collision or if you had an elision [phonetic] with a dock or

something like that, you know, it was part of the business. But now the consequences are so high that everything has flip-flopped around on collision avoidance, on the avoidance of accidents, on safety, and some of the things you would have gotten away with four years ago you don't do today.

But what's happening is that this port is growing so fast that we're experiencing a pressure to do things now that kind of drives us back into an old-school type of seat-of-your-pants approach, but layered on top of that is a whole lot of technologies. In this channel you just never lose that seat-of-your-pants ability, because you—

Tape 2, Side 1

JT: This is tape two, oral history interview with Captain Bob Webbon, by Jason Theriot. Captain Bob Webbon on Port of Houston, sixth August, 2006.

RW: From the get go, every time they'd dig the channel, as soon as they'd finish with it the ship owners would want the pilots to bring up bigger ships. The ship size does not stay relative to the channel. Every time the channel gets wider, the ship gets bigger. We just finished our deepening, widening now, and so what was the first order of business? Well, develop a whole matrix of the next size larger ships we can bring up the new channel. Happens ever time.

So you can never get into a comfort zone that you get a new channel, that, oh, well, things are becoming easier. Well, no. We're just bringing in bigger and bigger ships, so relatively speaking, things stay the same. But we have still the emphasis to bring in the bigger ships for the economic reasons, but now even more emphasis of liability and the consequences of what happens if there is an incident. So it's a lot more intense these days from a professional standpoint, versus the old days.

In the old days they didn't have near as much traffic in the channel, but the guys, that didn't make them any worse. They would take a ship down the channel, and there were not nearly as many beacons, and the radars were not nearly as sophisticated, but they could take a ship down the channel and really never see a thing, because they would get the ship over on the bank and they would just feel a little rudder, and they would just keep a little rudder on it, and just let that ship feel the bank all the way down the bank.

And they always knew where they were; they knew they were cutting on that right-hand bank, because they knew how much rudder it would take to keep that ship on the bank. We don't do it like that. You know, now we have computers and we're talking, we have more beacons and we know where we are in the channel on the center line.

But back then they used skills that are scientifically proven, that we're trained to use, that we use those techniques all the time, but we wouldn't do that today. That doesn't mean we don't move in fog; we just would not use that technique. So the techniques change through the years.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: Walk me through a typical day in the life of a pilot once he gets the call.

RW: Okay. Let's take the typical day, which is a call at one o'clock in the morning, which makes it difficult because you probably got off at six o'clock the previous morning, so you've had to try and sleep through the day, and it's been very difficult to sleep, move your whole sleep pattern around in one day. So you get a call at about one. They give you two hours to get to the ship. You get up, get showered up, get a cup of coffee and hit the road.

If you have a city dock job, say above the 610 [phonetic] Bridge, get up there. We go into the Port Authority. Port security will typically pick us up, take us down to the ship. Security throughout all the facilities is much heightened after 9/11. It's a lot more difficult for us to physically get to the ships these days.

But anyway, you get to the ship. You have a crew that typically checks out your identification when you get onboard, and it's up to the bridge. You have the

master pilot exchange with the master of the vessel, coordinate your tugboats to do the unmooring, check in with Coast Guard, make sure you can get under the bridge, make sure you don't have too much draft.

You have only the captain's word to go on that everything is working correctly, steering systems, the engine, and things like that. You take him at his word, do your master pilot exchange, and then you begin to transit out. You unmoor, then work your way down through the upper channel. You get down towards Shell and Lynchburg area. The traffic there these days is at times just really overwhelming. There's so many tows, and plus the ship traffic.

The radio is just, you really have to concentrate on the radio to get the picture in your mind, because the difference between a ship pilot and an airplane pilot is that an airplane pilot has a traffic system, and all he does is follow the commands of that traffic system. Every ship pilot is his own traffic system, and every ship pilot has to manage that traffic puzzle, and con the ship at the same time.

So you really have to understand the dynamics of the traffic as you're working your way through it. You have to get that picture down, and on this channel that is one of the most demanding parts of piloting on this channel, is managing your traffic. Then work your way down through the crossovers and down the Morgan's Point, and then once you're in the bay, you know, then you let the ship run.

You run it on up to about twelve knots and work your way down through the bay, continuing to work with traffic problems, trying not to overtake tows as you're meeting ships, you know, making sure you know what ship you're meeting, whether it's got draft, whether it doesn't, how your ship is going to affect the other pilot, because we work as a team out here. You have to work as a team out here.

Get it on down to the sea buoy, disembark at the sea buoy, and typically we're right there waiting on another ship to come up. We board another ship and we bring it all the way back up to the dock, doing all the things that it took us to get it out there all over again to get it back up to the dock. Usually it's about a fourteen-, maybe sixteen-hour day, and then we're guaranteed twelve hours off, and then we're right back up and at it again. And we do that for two solid weeks.

Now, that's a typical day. Certainly there's all kinds of different evolutions of that, but that's the typical day.

JT: One thing that I was noticing, which is really astonishing, is if you just say the ship channel, okay, that means certain things to certain people. But if you notice on this map here, which is printed from the Houston Pilots' website, all of these roadblocks and obstacles, these little islands, these several islands that are located all through here. You mention the uniqueness of Houston Ship Channel, yes, but

gosh, this looks so very dangerous, because of how narrow it is, and because of all these obstacles that you have to pass through. Is this a map that is imprinted in your mind? Do you know where every sandbar is, and every turn and every obstacle?

RW: Oh yes. That's what I'm paid to do. I mean, after doing literally thousands of transits, you eat, sleep, and breathe it, you know. You know it, you must know it. That's our job. I mean, I'm not paid to now understand the cargos, though that's a different component of the job that we still do. But when I'm on that ship, I'm there to focus on all the tiny, the little idiosyncrasies of that channel.

That itself looks demanding, but you've got to put on top of this all the different ships, all the different tows, all going this way, all coming this way, and that's what I'm trying to talk about is that on top of this you have this matrix of this huge traffic system to carry all these goods.

I look at it like an artery, and you've got all of these blood cells of different types, and they're all moving at different speeds. But the one thing in an artery, it's all going in the same direction. This artery has everything going in opposite directions. And if anything happens, which happens all the time, but if anything happens the whole system just stops. Everything just stops.

We have ships that they lose their steering, they lose their engines, almost daily, and when that happens, you know, you stop and the whole artery just has to stop. Then you've got to get everything back together and stabilize the situation, and then get that artery moving again as quickly as possible. So it gets very layered as a pilot, you know.

It's not just working through this narrow channel. It's all these other things that are going on, trying to get the traffic into the artery and get it out of the artery, get ships off the dock, get them turned around, blocking this artery, and then getting them going again to get it going again, to keep the flow moving. That's what's really amazing to watch, is watching this traffic that is so dense on this ship channel, work, watching it work.

I mean, people who come here, they're always amazed at how well the traffic moves on this ship channel, to be so narrow.

JT: Do you think that the visionaries, Tom Ball and Rice and the Allen brothers and some of the other legendary Houstonians who envisioned turning Buffalo Bayou into a ship channel, what do you think their thoughts would be on what you just described to me on the activity that is taking place there today?

RW: I'd say, "This is what we wanted. This is what we planned. This is what we thought could happen." You know, the more they got into it the more they

realized it could work, and, you know, there was a whole lot of other things going on. But they realized that all they had to do was connect, connect to the railroads, connect to the Brazos River Valley, to make that first connect and then they could build on that. Once they started bringing those first steamboats up there, they just said, hey, we can just get across the bar, there's no reason why this won't work. Yes, I think that they'd say, "Yeah, obviously this is what should happen." It's a natural evolution.

JT: I had one gentleman describe it as, these visionaries saw the potential and said, "Let's bring the gulf to us."

RW: Yes, which is totally unique, that's what I was saying. If you look at most any other port, think of any other port, just think about what you visualize as a port, and it is man going to the sea. It is man deciding this is a safe refuge for ships. That's not what happened here. That is completely different than what happened here, and that's what makes it very unique.

JT: If you look at Galveston, Port Arthur, just a few off the top of my head that I'm visualizing on a topography map, Port Fouchon [phonetic], New Orleans, these are all, like you say, sanctuaries on the gulf.

RW: Right.

JT: But the vision and the ingenuity and the—

RW: Money.

JT: —financial backing—

RW: Right.

JT: —to be able to dig their way sixty miles is really amazing.

RW: Yes. Not that channels hadn't been built in the past, but this, there were so many things that came together, and your project of showing how the oil industry was one of those huge pieces, it was just a lot of good luck, you know. It was a lot of good luck and a lot of bad luck, you know. What happened to Galveston in 1900, that's what put Houston over the top. It was their bad luck that made Houston.

Once that port was just completely devastated, and then they realized, against what all of those guys said, that the channel survived, Houston never looked back, and Galveston never recovered. To this day they have never recovered from the 1900 storm, never, and they never will. These days for a modern port you just have to have so much infrastructure, with freeways and with rail, with airports. You know, everything has to work. I mean, every thing has to come together to be successful these days.

What was unique is that Houston continues to bring that to that infrastructure, and Galveston now is just like a ship. If you discharge cargo in Galveston, you've still got it on a ship. You've got one little causeway to go across, and one little rail line. It'd never work.

JT: In 1947 Kerr McGee built the first—

RW: I saw that question. I haven't got a clue.

JT: —built the first offshore out of sight. You know, up until '47, of course, oil had been discovered here at the turn of the century in Beaumont, and the industry was growing rapidly, particularly with the Second World War and the demand on this type of natural resource. But by putting a drilling rig out of sight offshore, it really changed the way everything is done in the Gulf of Mexico, with respect to that industry. What is your opinion on how the offshore oil and gas transformed the Port of Houston?

RW: I haven't got a clue. [laughs] I mean, I really, I'm not versed to know that much. I mean, certainly that is so much more of an oil-and-gas story than a Port of Houston story. I mean, I'm sure it had an effect by enhancing the refining capabilities, but I don't know how that worked. I know that there has to be a pipeline system developed, and certainly—I mean, you didn't have ships going

out to those wells and loading, so that didn't happen, though it could happen maybe in the near future, but that didn't happen then. So I don't know, that's not a good question for me.

JT: Well, let's talk about the petrochemical industry. You mentioned it before, growing up in Port Arthur. Now, Port Arthur could very well have become this multi-petrochemical complex—

RW: Could have, could have, could have—

JT: —that I've seen driving on my way here today.

RW: Yes, but it wasn't the oil industry that made Houston. It was Klopper [phonetic], it was Captain Morgan, it was the Allen Brothers, it was all those guys who said, "We want to build a seaport." And in Port Arthur and Beaumont they were just worrying about building refineries. They didn't have a group of people that said, "We want to build a port." All they wanted was to get the oil in and get it out, and they didn't have the vision to get a head start on the dredging.

They even had a better river. The Sabine Natchez [phonetic] River was a lot easier to dredge, but they just didn't go after it. And once again, luck and unluck. You've got to realize that what started this whole thing was the Brazos River Valley. The Brazos River Valley was where the action was. I mean, that's where

the cotton farming was going on, that's where the money was. And they couldn't get the steamboats up the Brazos River. They were tearing the bottoms out, one after another. They couldn't even get insurance to get the boats up the Brazos River.

It was Klopper who said, "Man, if I just go get up Buffalo Bayou, hell, I'll put everything on a wagon and in a day I'm over to the Brazos River. This makes all the sense in the world." Port Arthur-Beaumont at that time there was nothing there, and they weren't, you know, the money wasn't close to them. It was over in the Brazos River. So it was lucky that Buffalo Bayou was close to the Brazos River and could make that connection.

And then it was, you know, that mindset that said, "Let's keep going. Let's make it—." And the Allen brothers and then Captain Morgan, getting across Red Fish Bar out here, and getting it right over there to Morgan's Point, it was just the picture was a little different. But still, they were focused on dredging. They were focused on getting this channel done, and then these other ports around here were not as focused on dredging, and they weren't in a strategic position to connect with so much wealth.

JT: Geography.

RW: Yes, geography had a lot to do with it. And like I say, that was some luck. And then from here, you know, the West is that way, so it was a western location, trying to develop this deep channel, money of the Brazos River, it was all—and that's what they knew. They knew that, and that's why they wanted to build this channel.

JT: In 1926 Port of Houston ranked eleventh in the U.S. in shipping and tonnage. After Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, mainly Katrina with its devastating effect on New Orleans, most of the individuals whom I've spoken with say that now Houston will be the number one port in the Western Hemisphere.

RW: Yes. Yes.

JT: So from eleventh to number one in seventy-five years. How do you explain that growth? What are the major contributors, or who are the major contributors?

RW: Well, certainly the refineries were huge contributors, and they still are. They're critically important to the port. Would the port be as large as it is today without the oil industry? No way. No way. It just wouldn't happen. So the oil-and-gas industry was critical to—same thing for the City of Houston. Same thing for the State of Texas, you know.

The oil industry is the lifeblood of this area, and it's been the driving force. Certainly after Houston was developed and they solved the ability to get to the Brazos River, you know, that was good, that got things going. And connecting the railroads into Houston, that got the thing going as a seaport, and it was developing slowly as a seaport. But once Spindletop came in, and then the finds at Goose Creek, and the refineries came in, it was just huge, you know, just input of tonnage that started coming into this area.

And then they started wanting more. They wanted bigger ships, bigger channel, wider channel, quicker delivery of the oil, and started driving more dredging, which allowed bigger grain ships, bigger container ships today, and etc., etc. It works hand in hand. But there's no way the Port of Houston would be what it is today without the oil industry, no way.

Certainly, you know, we're a fair grain port, but the Mississippi River is the natural highway for the grain, for the coal, for those types of products that are easily barged. We don't have a river going anywhere, you know. This is the end of it. The 610 Bridge, that's it, you know.

The Mississippi River goes all the way to Minnesota and beyond, so for those bulk commodities it's never been the real backbone of the port, to some degree, but international commerce has always been important, and is gaining now, is

really starting to be the real powerhouse, and whether it's steel, or cotton back then, or finished goods, that's what's going on today.

The ability now for the port to not only be seen as a conduit from Europe and South America is that, you know, the Far East has realized that the Port of Houston is very viable. I'm not really gifted in this history, but twenty years ago they decided that they would just buy the train companies and bring all the goods in from the Pacific Rim into California and Seattle and what have you, and then they would put the goods on the containers, put them on the trains, and just move them east.

And that worked for a long time, but they have overwhelmed the system. It can't keep up. It's more successful than they ever thought it would be, and now we're seeing ships coming straight from China, straight to the Port of Houston. And now you're seeing a development of warehousing capabilities, the largest Wal-Mart warehouse in the country being built right here in Baytown, Home Depot same deal.

So now the oil industry continues to be important, will always be important, but the Port of Houston's place in the world as general commerce is concerned is really starting to take off. It's really exceeding some of the infrastructure that was strictly oil and gas.

JT: It seems like when the big oil companies came through and began developing their refineries that it just opened up a whole new level of commerce ability, meaning dredging, deepening, infrastructure, rail and transit and all, and now you're probably looking at a balance between oil industry and then international commerce other than the oil-related products.

RW: Right, right, right.

JT: And that'll just continue to increase, I imagine.

RW: Yes, yes. The increases in the oil industry is going to be the increase of capacity in a refinery. You know, Exxon Mobil has made it clear that they're not going to build more refineries, but they're going to concentrate on what they call production creep. That means they're just going to build more cokers and crackers in their existing refineries.

You'll see that type of growth, but you're still going to see growth in the petrochemical industry and the manufacturing from the feedstocks from the refineries. That continues to grow quicker, it seems. I'm not a professional in the industry, but it seems to continue to grow almost exponentially here in the chemical manufacturing area.

JT: There's a lot of groups that are involved in here that make this magic work. Tell me about your experience, and I'll just list a few and then we can take each one of them one at a time. The Army Corps of Engineers, the Coast Guard, the Port Authority, obviously the Houston Pilots, what keeps these very different entities working in unison?

RW: As far as on the channel? The Houston Pilots. Us. The Coast Guard, they come and they go. The Corps of Engineers, they do what they have funds to do. The Port Authority, it's their charge to garner the funds, you know. We rely on them for the channel maintenance and what have you, but physically keeping this port running, it's the Houston Pilots.

Unlike a lot of associations, we have a very positive relationship with industry, and we continue to do things on the Houston Ship Channel that are not done anywhere else in the world.

JT: Give me an example.

RW: Well, we continue to meet the very, very large tankers on this channel that they just don't do anywhere else. We could do more, but the traffic density is so high that it just gets—you know, we set our plateaus. We set our box, you know, and we're always pushing the box, same way the oil industry does. But our box is damn big. It is huge.

The other thing we do is that because of our positive approach to our business and to the Port of Houston, we work very closely with the Port Authority, with the oil industry in being able to accommodate all types of vessels. And things come and go, you know. Whether it's a hurricane, whether it's 9/11, whether it's a new port, whether whatever, we're active politically, we're active in the community, we're very active in industry with bringing different industry groups together.

We're not adverse to industry, and we know that we're giving, you know, the charge by the governor of the State of Texas to do two things, and that is, make sure no oil gets in the water, to the best of our ability, and number two, make sure the State of Texas continues to grow. That's our charge and that's what we live by, and we take that very seriously, that economic development of this area depends on us.

JT: How many pilots today are we talking about?

RW: We're about eighty pilots.

JT: I hear there's a few lady pilots as well.

RW: We have two female pilots. We have African American pilots. We have Latino pilots. We are a very diverse group. We do not allow nepotism. We're

constantly looking for the best product that we can recruit from, and that's what sets us ahead of a lot of other groups.

JT: What about the tugboats? Now, they're an intricate part of—

RW: They are a huge part.

JT: —of making sure that things run smoothly.

RW: Yes, they're huge. It'd be very difficult to do our job without the tugboats. They're another service organization. They're profit-motivated, you know. They do not orchestrate anything as far as the channel is concerned, as far as what ships come and what ships go, and how we put plans together for moving different types of vessels and what have you. They're not involved in that. They are strictly a service to the ship owner, to help get his ship moored.

JT: You can only dredge so wide and so deep.

RW: Why? [laughs]

JT: Relatively speaking. Over time I'm sure that this channel is going to keep growing physically, but with respect to Barber's Cut and Bayport the Houston Ship Channel did something very differently. They took a chance with this

containerization. Is this something that we're going to see in the future, is other similar Barber's Cuts being thought of and developed, and actually dug and created along this ship channel and along other channels?

RW: Oh, I think definitely, definitely. It's like a huge snowball coming down a hill now. Barber's Cut got it rolling, and Bayport is going to keep it rolling, but this thing is just going to grow. If you look at the demographic, just look at the United States.

Look at the State of Texas. The State of Texas is going to become one of the focal points of this country. There are so many people moving into the State of Texas, for a number of reasons, and they need goods and services, and the goods come in on ships, and the best-structured port on the Gulf Coast is the Port of Houston. Once you get companies moving here, doing business here, they get used to it, they learn it, they move their people here, and obviously they enjoy doing business here or they would leave. But they keep coming. So I think you're definitely going to see more of that activity, absolutely.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: I'm interested in a question that not many folks have neither had an opportunity to answer, or had much input on, and I'm hoping that you can add something to this discussion. I'm speaking of federal and state legislation that has had some

impacts on your job, on your industry, on what goes on on the ship channel. I'll just run a few of these off and then you give me your opinion on them, where they stand today, maybe a little bit of the background and what it looks like for the future for some of these pieces of legislation.

Let's talk about the Jones Act.

RW: You know, it's a sad situation, the Jones Act. You know, I would have never been given this opportunity to do what I do if it hadn't been for the Jones Act, because it was only because of the Jones Act that keeps ships under U.S. flag, because shipping companies, ship owners would drop the U.S. flag in a heartbeat given the opportunity, and completely flag out to flags of convenience, except because of the Jones Act they can't take a plasticizer from Baytown and deliver it to New Jersey. Can't happen. So you've got to have a ship to do that, or build a pipeline.

So only because of the Jones Act do we have ships taking Alaskan North Slope crude oil down to California. That would all be foreign-flag ships under foreign jurisdiction if it wasn't for the Jones Act. So the people that you see that are in positions like mine are here because of the protection from the Jones Act.

I don't know where you would get pilots if you didn't have ships for us to work on. I don't know why you would have Merchant Marine academies. I don't

know why you would have King's Point. There would be no reason to have any of this if it wasn't for the Jones Act. But the Jones Act is under constant threat, and it's just because the American public, you know, you look at this discussion about minimum wage going on right now in Washington.

That minimum wage would be a king's ransom for somebody coming out of some of the hinterland of Russia, Red China. Those people work for a lot less, period. And you're not going to work for what they make in Red China, and neither am I. And so if it hadn't been for the Jones Act it would be very interesting to see what would happen in the ports of the United States.

JT: What do you know of where the debate is today on the Jones Act?

RW: Well, you just had President [George W.] Bush disregard the Jones Act because of Hurricane Katrina, saying that we couldn't get enough gasoline up to the East Coast, because we didn't have enough U.S.-flag ships. So he suspended the Jones Act for ninety days. It's huge. It's never been done before. So it's always under pressure.

JT: Do you think that may have set a precedent for [unclear]?

RW: It's possible. It's possible. Your ship owners and, you know—like I said, Exxon has run a very professional fleet, but given the opportunity, would they flag all

their ships out foreign? In a heartbeat, because their stock owners want a return, and the stock owners, just the pressure from the stock owners to make profits just wouldn't stand for it.

JT: What about NAFTA?

RW: I don't know. I don't know enough about it to comment. I do know that the trade between the Port of Houston and South America and Central America is huge. It is incredibly valuable. But how NAFTA has affected that, I just don't know enough.

JT: We've seen a big shift recently, in the last decade and a half, of not only the oil companies but many different entities and businesses in general, shifting to more environmental sustainability. It seems like we've finally realized we need to do something to keep this around for another 200 years or so. Talk about some of these other acts, like the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, the Pollution Act of Water Surface. How have these changed your business, and shipping in general?

RW: Well, I think OPA '90 was, you know, it changed a lot. Basically, requiring the double-hulled tankers, you know. That was the big king's ransom. But it was kind of a toothless wonder, and it was incredibly slow in implementation. My association, I think we are the only pilot association maybe in the world that we have specifically outlawed single-hull tankers in the Port of Houston, if they want

to receive the economic benefit of some of our more lenient and more aggressive allowances.

In other words, if you want to move a tanker at night, a large tanker at night, it has to be a double-hulled ship. You want to run a single-hull ship? Well, you're going to have to do it in daylight, and you go to the end of the pack. So we've been very discriminatory against older tonnage; that's the Houston Pilots. So yes, it's a good thing, but it wasn't aggressive enough for us, and we've gone beyond that.

JT: Who runs—I'm sure you have committees and spokespersons, but do you have one general at the top of the pilots?

RW: Yes, yes, and he's elected yearly, and he just comes from any one of the partners.

JT: Are the pilots under the jurisdiction of the Port of Houston Authority?

RW: It's not the Port Authority but the port commissioners, the pilot commissioners I should say. The pilot commissioners oversee us, yes.

JT: And you folks get paid from the commission?

RW: Negative. We get paid by the ship owners. Certainly, regulatory-wise, the U.S. Coast Guard has authority over us, but we answer to the Pilot Commission, and the Coast Guard has the statutory enforcement capabilities, and then the ship owners pay us.

JT: What about the next fifty years? With mechanization, which we talked about before, giant cranes that the Port of Houston just received, obviously the containerization, which has really revolutionized the industry, the maritime industry, the next fifty years, what do you see as the major changes in what takes place on the ship channel at the Port of Houston?

RW: Well, as we discussed, it's going to be continued growth. It's just synergy. You know, the City of Houston continues to grow. There will be downturns, you know. Life is cyclical. This industry is cyclical, just like the oil industry is cyclical. So there will be ups and downs, but I think there won't be a huge change.

There's just going to be this continued push for expansion, and it's very difficult to do, because land has gotten so valuable, the process of dredging has gotten so expensive. You know, mechanization with using less people and these container yards, well sure, it's already happening in Europe. It will happen here. But that doesn't affect—that's more of a labor issue between labor unions and what have

you, and they tend to adapt. They have already. I'm sure they will adapt in the future.

There's going to have to be a lot better job done between the maritime industry, the port, the Coast Guard, everybody involved on this bay to do a much better job interfacing with the citizens of our community, and that's one thing that's got to continue to improve. But there's still land that can be acquired, and it's just going to be more expansion.

JT: Are you in favor of the [unclear] the new corridor that they're considering developing?

RW: You know, anything that improves the transportation industry, certainly I have to be in favor of, because we don't live in a vacuum just because I work on the ship channel. It depends on all the infrastructure and the inter-modal connections, like I said, whether it's highways, whether it's rail, whether it's pipelines, you know. All of it is a big puzzle, and whether this specific type of approach is the way to do it, I'm not a professional in that industry. But I do know that we have to continue to not only improve the ship channel, you've got to improve the rail line. You've got to improve the roads.

JT: I-10.

RW: I-10, everything, yes. If you're going to have more people come into an area, you've got to make accommodations for that. And yes, I'm in support of any transportation improvement.

JT: The MMS is the big boss in the Gulf of Mexico. What can that organization do to bring more awareness, more education to the public about the oil industry, about its processes, about its viability, about how important it is to continue with this growth, and to assure its citizens that this is necessary?

RW: There's a huge—I say a huge—there is a tiny, not huge, it's a tiny clash no matter what you do out here, on this body of water, in these communities, and it's because everything is so close. You know, you've got refineries right on top of neighborhoods. You've got ports right in the middle of neighborhoods, you know. I don't see it as a bad thing, but a lot of people see it as a bad thing.

To me, when you're planning an area, to keep it close, to keep your transit times down, whether you're going back and forth to work, so you don't have to drive all the way across town to do what you do, I appreciate. But there's a lot of people say, "No, that's not the way you want to do things."

So the oil industry, like our industry in the port and what have you, really has to get out ahead of the curve and educate people. I think this LNG project that we see here is a perfect example. We're seeing the LNG expansion in the State of

Texas because we are very open-minded here to industry. But you've got to get out ahead of the curve and tell people how good this is before you come to the table and say, "We want to do this."

You've got to explain how much money this is gong to bring to the community, how many tax dollars, how many jobs, all this before you come in and ask to do these aggressive things, and they are aggressive. You know, this deal offshore with the LNG terminals offshore, you know, I thought the industry did a really poor job of explaining how much effect that—

Tape 3, Side 1

JT: All right. This is tape three with Captain Bob Webbon, oral history interview on August 6th, 2006.

The LNG projects offshore.

RW: Yes. I didn't see much up front, and I still to this day haven't seen much up front. All I heard was, okay, well, we're going to do the more expensive route, and warm the LNG on the ship or something like that. I never really heard exactly how it came to its end.

But, didn't hear very much up front, and my industry is very guilty of that, too. You know, you've got to get out and you've got to tell people about the benefits of doing things, and how it's not going to harm them, and how it's not going to harm the environment, instead of reacting. You know, the MMS and us, we very much have been in a reactionary mode. That ain't going to work.

You're not going to get anything done in the future, because you've got these pressures that are developing with these communities so close, and very diversified communities. That's another problem is that in this community we have so many people who work at NASA, who are aerospace engineers, who are in support positions of that type of activity. They know nothing about what goes on out here, and so to them most everything that goes on out here is a negative.

So you've got to get ahead of the curve, you really do. That was one thing that I would say, because we had the same problems in our industry.

JT: Just to kind of re-emphasize, you know, I've been here for six years. I didn't really fully understand the port, its contributions, its impacts, until I began to study them, and drive over 610 or the Beltway Bridge, and you look and you see the refineries, or you drive on your way to the port. It really is an awesome scene.

RW: I saw your question on that, and to me the reason why people don't know about it is pretty simplistic—they can't see it. You know, you go to San Francisco, what

do you see? You go to Seattle, what do you see? You know? You go down to San Pedro in L.A., what do you see? Or New York, Charleston, Miami, Fort Lauderdale? But here you can't see it. You just physically can't see it.

JT: And it's probably difficult for just your average Houstonian to really understand that without—

RW: Seeing it, yes. You don't have the visual cues.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: The little museum that could. Tell me about your involvement with the Houston Maritime Museum and where it stands today, and what you hope to see in the future for this museum?

RW: Well, I am very pleased and honored to be on the board of directors, and I was just asked to become part of the board of directors a month ago, so I'm really enthusiastic. I mean, I think this is really going to be a great thing for the City of Houston. It's something that should have been done twenty years ago, thirty, forty years ago.

As we've just been talking about, it's an incredibly unique story of how this ship channel made this city, and how the maritime industry played into that. I think

it's a very interesting story, and that's my perspective with the museum. Now, the museum is a collection of all types of artifacts, maritime artifacts, but we want to try and focus the museum on the City of Houston. We want to focus it on, just like I've said, on how this maritime concept played into this economic development of the State of Texas.

And we think there's a hell of a story to tell. We think there's a vast amount of marine things that we can bring to the public as an education process for the City of Houston, and as we've discussed, I personally feel like these are the things that you have to do if you want industry to continue to grow. You have to educate the public on where you've been, where you are today, and where you're going to go.

We feel that the maritime industry is hugely important to this area, and we're looking forward to helping to educate the people about what's happened here. So I'm very positive about it. It looks like that the building is going to be on the agenda in August for the Port Authority to vote and approve, to move the building over into our hands. Basically, we're not going to take the building physically. We're going to have a thirty-year lease for very little money, and then we're going to start a process of funding the refurbishing of the building.

We'll start with the artifacts that we have out of Jim's collection, and then we plan to build on that and start bringing a lot of things together, like this club. This club is a huge wealth of history, of boating on Galveston Bay and—

JT: The Houston Yacht Club.

RW: The Houston Yacht Club. And there's a lot of things in this area that we want to pull together. The process going on at University of Houston that you're involved with, I mean, this is a perfect dovetail. And bringing it all together with the mayor's oversight is the way to do it. That is *the* way to do it, and we would love to be part of that process.

JT: Now, is this something that you got yourself into, or we were asked?

RW: I wormed my way into it, yes, yes, oh, absolutely. You know, I'm not, quote, "a history buff," okay. I enjoyed history when I was going to college. I enjoy going to maritime museums. I've been through a lot of maritime museums here in the United States and over in Europe, and I just see a huge need here in Houston.

I just think that once industry gets onboard, especially the oil industry, and tells the story that they could tell, we can start realizing the funding that we're going to need down the road to really put this thing together. We really are going to plan to go to cater to the story of the oil industry and how it fits into this area. We think that there's such a dovetail between the tanker fleets, the floating rigs, the exploration that came out of this area, the techniques that were devised her, and a lot of it has a lot of maritime input. So we think this is the place.

I mean, physically I can envision a history of the tankers, a history of the evolution of oil rigs, the floating rigs, semi-submersible production rigs in this museum. I can envision all of that in this museum, plus the containerization, how containers began, going all the way back to steamboat evolution and what have you.

We plan to have a model-building facility within the museum where we'll actually be creating models. So there's a lot of different interests, but that's my focus. And there's a great group of people that have different interests in the maritime industry, but I think that's why they really can lean on some of us who are actively involved in the port right now, is because we really want to see this museum telling this story. So, yes, I'm very pumped up.

JT: And I'll bet that Jim Manzilillo's collection has given you guys a jump start.

RW: Oh yes. You know, it's something that I would have thought we definitely should do from scratch, but Jim, his collection and his energy, and his position in his life, looking for a home for his life's work, and for us to provide that home for his work, not that all of it's going to be displayed, but we'll take pieces out of that. We're going to add what we hope to be a tremendous collection to that. His will be the beginning, and that really does give us a head start, it really does. Not only

his collection, but his energy and his vision gives us a great head start. So yes, we're looking forward to it.

JT: What happens if Hurricane Rita comes thirty miles further west? What kind of dramatic impact is that going to have?

RW: God knows. We were so lucky, you know, we were so lucky. This city was so lucky. My mom's house is still over in Bridge City, and I go over there from time to time and I look around, and it's devastating, it's absolutely—and people here just don't know how devastating it was to Port Arthur and Beaumont and Orange and that area. It is a sad story.

These storms are life-altering, you know, as we all know now, and it could alter this city. This city is at risk, there's no doubt. I mean, it's destroyed New Orleans. New Orleans, you know, it will never be in our lifetime what it was. It could happen in Houston. What can you do physically? All you can do is make the best plans you can, and everybody is doing that.

We have technologies that we can run the channel without any navigational aids. We have our own proprietary, very precise navigation systems that we carry. If we lose everything, we can still move ships. We have made a plan, which we didn't have last year, but we have a plan now. We have a helicopter that's on retainer, that if we need it it's ready to fly in about thirty minutes. It stays with

us, so that we can physically move between refineries and between port facilities via helicopter when everything is gridlocked on the freeways. We have plans on how to evacuate our boats, protect our assets.

So all you can do is just prepare as best you can, and then come up with ways to get things up and rolling as quick as possible. And we feel like we're pretty ready, as far as our association is concerned, but even in the best of circumstances if that storm would have hit a full strength here, whoo, it's hard to say.

JT: Yes, mother nature is really hard to combat. If you look at Galveston, what happened there, as we've noted today, New Orleans, that place will never be the same, particularly the port and the shipping area, it's really going to be a long time before it's back up and running. I had a gentleman explain to me that what probably happened is that companies will leave from New Orleans and will come—

RW: It's already happening.

JT: —come further west.

RW: It's already happening. We see it. We see it, you know, because we interface with the ships all the time, and we're—I'm always very curious. "Captain, where

are you from? Where have you been? I haven't seen this ship before." We see it already.

JT: Nothing but to plan, really, that's really all you can do.

RW: Yes, yes. You know, mother nature is like it's—you've hit two perfect examples, Galveston and City of New Orleans. We're a little bit further inland, but we've, because of the oil-and-gas industry we're a lot more at risk because of all the subsidence.

JT: Let's say a hundred years from now, what would be your, let's say a one- or two-sentence advice for a pilot, a young pilot a hundred years from now, who's operating on the ship channel?

RW: Oh, God, it's hard to imagine. It's hard to imagine. I mean, I think if you bring it back a little closer to, say, thirty years from now—

JT: Okay, fifty years.

RW: Let's say thirty or fifty years from now. You know, there are going to be changes here. Technology is going to allow the pilots to do some even more amazing things down the road. We're seeing just bits and pieces of it. They're going to be doing things in adverse weather conditions that we don't do now, or that we just

deal with now. It's going to be just a part of the job, you know, thirty or fifty years from now.

JT: You mean fog?

RW: Fog is a big one, you know. They'll have the capability to do amazing things, and they'll be more professional than us. They'll be better trained than us, and they're going to need it, because they're going to keep bringing bigger and bigger ships in. Industry is going to continue to demand more economies of scale. But that's going to be exciting, you know. I think it's going to be great. I think this association is going to here for a long time to come, long time.

JT: Thank you.

RW: Hey, thank you. I appreciate it.

[End of interview]